

Frank Campbell: Responses to the pairing.

Gentleness

I was glad to have the opportunity to attend a group session as part of the wider 'Fruits of the Spirit' project. As a retired educator, it was rather a challenge to work with the visual rather than the textual. I had a sense the boundaries of the project were still emerging from a tension between 'art appreciation' and a wider concept involving a kind of investigation into symbols within the paintings. Most people [in the group] drew on experiences of working with literature and scripture. My reference to peace study and non-violence was to imply that war-making, arms manufacture, and militarism are themselves a political ideology, not simply part of being 'patriotic'. It is important that this sort of interdisciplinary enquiry involving the political, cultural, and religious is part of the 'seeing' or reading of artworks such as this pairing.

Afterthoughts on the pairing

The first thing which came to mind about Gainsborough's work was the rather cool reserve and composure of the elder sister Mary who responds with confidence and affection, implied by their physical closeness, towards her younger sister, Margaret. The artist has achieved a remarkable family resemblance, but in some ways, it does not seem like a happy atmosphere between, the painter, their father, and the daughters as sitters. The dark background used focuses light on the elder child. Was he making a comment about growing up and adolescence? What do the girls make of sitting for his portrait? Would there be any dialogue? Are they content to sit there? Keeping Dad happy?

I recall Lizzie's portrait as full of vitality and about closeness, vigour, as well as implied violence through the lost limb of one of the sitters. Gentleness does not necessarily mean meekness and subservience. This work evokes idea of being 'happy in one's own skin' even during or after a painful situation. There seems plenty of interaction and vitality with the photographer, has he just cracked a joke? When *Couple* was first displayed in Southampton, two Hebrew Bible excerpts accompanied it. These are texts offering wisdom to all including reference to 'beat[ing] swords into ploughshares' –crucial to understanding this painting, but how does this reference change our reading of the picture?

Gentleness as an attribute of the Spirit

While some forms of Christianity focus on the role of the Spirit as an encounter with the God of the Holy Trinity, including the Charismatic movement or Pentecostal churches, others would recognise the Spirit from the prayerful invocation 'In the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.' The Biblical account of the meeting of Elijah in a cave at Mount Horeb¹ denoted a mighty wind, an earthquake, and a massive fire.² However, Yahweh³, was not present. Instead, he manifested in a gentle breeze urging Elijah to establish a new form of prophecy.⁴ In the New Testament, St. Paul lists the gifts of the Spirit including 'gentleness', 'Since the Spirit is our life, let us be directed by the Spirit.'⁵ In our

¹ Mount Horeb is the site where the Ten Commandments were given to Moses.

² Christian Bible, 1 Kings 19:12-16

³ Yahweh is the name for the God of the Israelites

⁴ Carlos Mesters, *Defenseless Flower*, p12

⁵ Christian Bible, New Testament, Galatians 5:12-16

context, the 'Fruits of the Spirit' framework evokes the significance of faith in the development of Western culture and art.

Christian theology in the present perhaps focuses on Christ's mission and his saving work rather than the process of humanity flourishing. The word 'spirit' has been secularised. This is evident in the respect and thanks to the NHS and Care professions during the Covid-19 lockdowns. We can speak of 'a good spirit' in a school or workplace without reference to religion.

Centuries ago, St. Thomas Aquinas wrote he would rather feel compassion than seek to know its definition, a sentiment many of us would like to agree with and one we should have in mind as we try to understand the reality of gentleness as an attribute of the Spirit. It is easy to focus on language rather than acknowledge that feelings are to be experienced, not just studied in abstraction. Rather than just aiming to unpack gentleness as a concept, we can attempt to be more active in practising being gentle in our own lives. Of course, gentleness can affect not only personal relationships but also community interactions and cultures. Especially in an age of disconnectedness, the gift, or charism, and choice to practice gentleness is integral to society flourishing. A present-day Latin American theologian wrote, 'Only a church that lets itself be invaded by the Spirit, the Renewer of all things, and is attentive to the signs of the times can become the new heaven that the new human being and the new earth need.'

Importance of Gentleness

Moving from the intimacy of portraits by Gainsborough and Jones to societal interaction, law, and order, I have chosen two present-day episodes which confirm the importance of gentleness. This century has seen an escalation of violent conflicts worldwide, and consequently, legitimate acts of protest have been met with enhanced policing to prevent civil unrest. Organised protests are required to notify authorities which means preventative measures such as 'kettling' can be set up in advance. However, using mobile phones allowed recent protesters in London to gather in large numbers in a short time. Many protest strategies have since developed from the Occupy and Extinction movements. Non-violent protest is an effective process leading to negotiation. Speaking truth to power can be achieved without violence – and gentleness with ourselves and others is important.

The second real-life episode establishes some basic principles of direct action and non-violence. Like many South American cities, Medellin, Columbia, boasts a lavish city centre reflecting the wealth of some citizens, while poor people in the surrounding districts, or barrios, exist in poverty without basic resources such as clean water. Young mothers who approached civic authorities for support were refused and so decided to take direct action. In protest, they came in groups of ten to the Square and began washing their infants around a large ornamental fountain in the Square. This shocked the wealthy wives who met there for coffee, and before long authorities began to move the peasants on. However, more mothers and their babies continued to replace those moved on. Thus, conversations developed between the wealthy folks and young mothers, resulting in a joint petition by both poor and rich citizens of Medellin to improve access to fresh water in the poorer districts. They were successful and poor unemployed men were able to provide labour such as pipe laying, which was fundamental to achieving this, now shared, goal. Working together

on a common purpose or goal is vital. Gentleness can be active. Perseverance, and sumud (steadfastness) is essential. Imagination and creativity are valuable tools, and personal dignity and respect are crucial for all.

[Lizzie has responded to this last example given by Frank by painting a series of new paintings that will be shared and form part of an upcoming event at Southampton City Art Gallery in early 2023 to celebrate Gentleness and Southampton's role in the *Fruits of the Spirit* project.]

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